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ABSTRACT

The role of press secretary has attained a new significance during the past ten years because of presidential efforts to concentrate the focus of news on the White House. Originally intended to serve the public, the press secretary is now an important government official who not only conveys information but also explains and defends presidential actions as well. Three recent press secretaries, Ron Ziegler, Ron Nessen, and Jody Powell, illustrate this change in role definition. Prior to Watergate, Ziegler enjoyed a comfortable relationship with the press. As the tension mounted, however, he grew uncommunicative and hostile and used tactics to divert questions and to mislead the press. When Ron Nessen came to the White House, he pledged to establish a spirit of trust and credibility with the press through direct answers to their questions and by arranging frequent presidential contact with reporters. Still, at the hint of criticism of Ford, he attacked the press. The most recent press secretary, Jody Powell is praised for his candor and homespun humor. In spite of his disorganization and forgetfulness, he brings some order and harmony to press briefings. Time will bring a more accurate evaluation of his service to the reporters and the people. (MAI)

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FREEDOM OF INFORMATION CENTER REPORT NO. 386

PRESS SECRETARIES: A BRIEF LOOK

This report was written by Hines E. Rogers III, an M.A. candidate at the University of Missouri School of Journalism.

Introduction

> The conflict between the men who make and the men who report the news is as old as time. News may be true, but it is not truth, and reporters and officials seldom see it the same way. The first great event, or Man in the News, was Adam, and the accounts of his creation have been the source of controversy ever since.[1]

Although writing about the press and foreign policy, James Reston's comment about that conflict could well apply to the conflict between the presidency and the press. It is a conflict that never seems to end.

"Presidential press secretaries are like punching bags. They absorb blows without returning them. And they always bounce back for more." That was (**National Observer**, 1-20-73) one definition of a press secretary's role. The late Peter Lisagor said:

> The press secretary represents the press to the president, but it cannot, in the nature of things, be a disinterested representation. In the inevitable clash of interest between press and government, a press secretary might try mediation or arbitration. In the end, however, he must take his place on the "other side." This doesn't mean he is useless to the press. It does mean that we must understand the true nature of his role.[2]

George Reedy, who was a press secretary to Lyndon Johnson, said the press secretary is a "transmission belt" for those who cannot see the president daily.[3] The press secretary must also advise the president on how the public sees press relations, for other White House advisers, he said, live "in a cocoon."

Another of LBJ's press secretaries, George Christian, said the definition of a press secretary's role is easy: The press secretary is a person hired by the president, who must serve the president and is accountable to the president.[4] Reedy noted:

> It's the President who's supposed to serve the public, not his press secretary. It's a disservice to the public to focus attacks on the press secretary. It's not his doing, after all. I would guess that Presidents prefer the attention of bad publicity on their press secretaries.[5]

Jerald terHorst, who resigned as President Gerald Ford's press secretary following the Nixon pardon, later wrote about his role. The spokesman, terHorst wrote, is not only a conveyor of information, but an explainer and defender of presidential actions. He must be familiar with the thoughts and considerations that went into a decision. He must have access to the president and be able to contribute to decisions, at least to be able to tell the president what public reaction would be. "At the end of the process, a spokesman should feel in his heart and mind that the Chief's decision is the right one so that he can speak with a persuasiveness that stems from conviction."[6]

In the past 20 years, with the increasing complexity of the world, the focus of information from Washington, D.C., has shifted more and more to the White House. Every presidential action and word is scrutinized. Thus, the press secretary has become an important government official, for the president's words come through the press secretary. This report will examine three recent press secretaries — Ron Ziegler, Ron Nessen and Jody Powell — and their effect on the news.

Ronald Ziegler

Ronald Louis Ziegler was termed an expert in his craft: the "Art of Ambiguity." As James M. Naughton of the New York **Times** wrote:

> . . . Ziegler is fully prepared to say nothing. If pressed he will say next to nothing. And if backed against the wall he will say almost nothing. . . . He does not give out a heck of a lot of information. But

Summary:

In the past 10 years, U.S. presidents increasingly have tried to bring the entire news focus to the White House, thus giving a new significance to the role of the press secretary. Conflict between the press and the press secretary polarized over issues such as Vietnam and Watergate, creating difficulty for the press secretary and affecting the American people's knowledge of what their government was doing.

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> then he is not there to tell as much as possible, but as little.[7]

Robert Semple of the New York **Times**, noting that Ziegler was kept on a "tight leash," summed up his background:

> He probably came to his job with less experience in national and world affairs, not to mention the specific problems of fending off the Washington press corps, than any of his predecessors.[8]

Techniques and Critiques

Richard Nixon had a reputation for a lack of frankness at times, so Ron Ziegler came to the White House with his credibility also being a little suspect.[9] After four years, he was not given (**National Observer**, 1-20-73) any laurels for frankness.

Yet no one accused him of being lazy. From the time he started as press secretary, he worked longer and harder than any member of the media. He was described (**Wall Street Journal**, 12-29-69) as "undeniably smart and aggressive," wanting to do a good job and fast to learn. He was given the freedom to attend meetings on both domestic and foreign policy, the only official besides the president allowed to do so. Ziegler said he was free to enter Nixon's office whenever he pleased.[10]

The complaints about press treatment by Ziegler began early. After Ziegler had been in office 11 months, the **Wall Street Journal** (12-29-69) quoted one unidentified correspondent as saying, "Ron is programmed to do nothing." He had failed to provide any clues to Nixon's thoughts, the article said, and the feeling among White House reporters was not directed so much toward Ziegler, but more through Ziegler to Nixon. Nixon, reporters felt, did not want much information to be disclosed.

Several questions were raised. One, sometimes Ziegler's information was not correct. Two, while other press secretaries did cut off access to White House aides (James Hagerty), were also sometimes wrong (Pierre Salinger) and uncommunicative (George Christian), or gave their own thoughts (Bill Moyers), Ziegler failed to give anything but routine information, such as at what time Nixon would leave for San Clemente. Third, he had no background in government or journalism; and fourth, he gave confusing meanings to the English language.

Ziegler did admit that the federal government and the Nixon administration made up confusing phrases and bureaucratic jargon. In 1971, he promised to work harder to eliminate the confusion.[11] But the complaints continued.

Looking back at the era of Watergate, James Reston summed up (**New York Times**, 5-30-73) Ziegler's position both during that troubled time and throughout the Nixon administration. Unlike previous press secretaries, Reston wrote:

> . . . Mr. Ziegler has never had any real freedom to interpret the substance or even the tactics of President Nixon's actions. He was brought in, unlike the others before him, not to interpret the President to the press and vice versa, but merely to put out what he was told to put out. He was a guided propaganda missile from the first, or, as somebody put it better, he was "a recorded announcement."

"He's programmed to give out only the information the President wants given out, and only in the amounts and at the times of the President's choosing," James Deakin of the St. Louis **Post-Dispatch** said (**National Observer**, 1-20-73).

Ziegler, who professed on many occasions to liking the job of press secretary immensely, freely admitted to one technique:

> I've had to develop techniques to be uninformative occasionally, without uttering the words "I don't know." So I learned to affect this poker face — and incidentally there's a world of difference between a poker face and a blank look. With the expression, or lack of expression, I usually say, "I have no information on that."[12]

Before Watergate, Ziegler was considered "an affable fellow" by most reporters.[13] **Time** magazine noted that besides the complaints, Ziegler was "personally popular with newsmen, who consider him a decent fellow in difficult circumstances."[14] He was considered a great technician for planning press arrangements for White House trips, and reporters "find his company a pleasure. His easygoing nature is a rarity among White House staffers. . . . " That was all to change.

Watergate

Everything changed because of Watergate. **Time** noted the running confrontation between Ziegler and reporters (in the summer of 1973) and said Ziegler "has never been popular with White House reporters." During the early Watergate revelations, he was

> unresponsive. . . . Thus there was no cushion of rapport when the full impact of Watergate began to be felt. . . . [Reporters] are giving him the roughest treatment any presidential press secretary in memory has absorbed.[15]

The problem began in late spring, 1973, when Ziegler declared all previous White House statements about Watergate "inoperative." He had been denying all White House involvement in the affair for the past 10 months.[16]

Early May, 1973, was a time of joy among newsmen, or maybe a time of letting off steam. **Newsweek** rhapsodized:

> For the Washington press corps, it was a week of almost surrealistic vindication. First President Nixon applauded the role of a "vigorous free press" in exposing the Watergate scandal and urged reporters to "give me hell every time I'm wrong." Next, Vice President Agnew deplored the "unfortunate hostility which has existed too long" between the media and the Administration. Finally, Presidential press secretary Ronald Louis Ziegler publicly apologized to Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of The Washington Post for having reviled them and their disclosures about Watergate.[17]

When the dam finally broke, Clark Mollenhoff exploded at Ziegler after the "inoperative" statement had been made. "Do you feel free to stand up there and lie and then come around later and just say it's all 'inoperative'? You're not entitled to any credibility."[18]

The press took its frustration out on Ziegler, because he

was the only representative of the White House they saw. In July of that year, John Dean testified before the Senate Watergate committee that Ziegler's superiors in the White House sent him into the briefing room with little or no information about Watergate and the White House role in the burglary. His outward shows of arrogance often concealed ignorance of the truth, truth he was not told. By this time, Ziegler was doing less and less of the daily press briefings, with deputy press secretary Gerald Warren handling them.[19]

But the briefings continued to be acrimonious. R.W. Apple Jr. of the New York **Times** described (7-13-73) one such briefing with Warren — who had not seen the president that day:

> . . . this morning for the first time in the memory of correspondents who have covered the Presidency for two decades, the authority of a spokesman to speak for the President was openly questioned. . . . To many in the room, the breakdown in communications appeared nearly complete.

As **Newsweek** said, "Briefings occasionally are transformed into shouting matches. . ." with scorn and sarcasm.[20]

On June 6, 1973, Nixon announced (New York **Times**, 6-14-73) that Ziegler was being given a promotion to Assistant to the President. He was given the responsibility for the White House communications office — replacing Herbert Klein, who had resigned by that time — along with scheduling duties and continuing in charge of the press office. Warren handled daily briefings, with Ziegler briefing the press on important events. Speculation was that Nixon was moving Ziegler from the spotlight more from mercy than to placate the press.

In the end, it was probably the Nixon press system and Nixon's mistrust of the press that made Ziegler take so much criticism during Watergate. Nixon's seclusion from the press made Ziegler the only available spokesman. He was out front, combining the ability to say no more nor no less than Nixon wanted. That kept (Los Angeles **Times**, 7-15-73) him solidly placed in Nixon's affection.

The Road to Resignation

During the closing months of 1973, Ziegler was working more and more with the president and not briefing the press. Warren was handling that job.

In late January, 1974, though, Ziegler returned to begin regular briefings of the press. He had not appeared (Milwaukee **Journal**, 1-23-74) on a regular basis since June of the previous year.

Questioned as to why Ziegler was returning, Warren said (Milwaukee **Journal**, 1-23-74), "The president thought it was a good idea and Ron wanted to do it." Speculation among White House reporters was that with the serious issue of impeachment facing Nixon, and with Watergate indictments coming with more frequency, Nixon wanted his most trusted press aide briefing the now hostile press.

As 1974 continued, most reporters felt that since Ziegler spent so much time with Nixon, whatever was on Ziegler's mind was on the president's. According to the New York **Times** (7-23-74),

> When Ronald Ziegler is angry it is a reasonably safe bet that the seclusive Mr. Nixon is angry. When Ronald Ziegler is calm and expansive, it is likely the President is in a happy mood.

The Public Relations Ploys

For a general overview of how Ziegler operated, and the techniques and methods of operation he used, two studies were incisive in giving a picture of White House relations with the press and how the White House worked.

Timothy Crouse, in his book describing press coverage of the 1972 election, catalogued several gimmicks Ziegler used.[21]

Ziegler used "the old squeeze play," a ploy put into effect when the briefing might be troublesome (especially during the Watergate period). It worked like this: Ziegler would start the regular 11 a.m. briefing late, as reporters would need time to write stories for possible use in afternoon papers. Noon was and is a critical hour, especially for wire services and their broadcast clients, so Ziegler would cut down the available time. Then, he would begin the briefing with dull, routine announcements, taking up more time. After killing as much time as possible, he would announce some bit of information that the wire services would want to place on the wire immediately. However, some reporters, not having a crucial noon deadline and with no afternoon briefing to ask questions, would want more details about this item. Thus the wire reporters, pressed for time, would be pitted against the other reporters. And, of course, Ziegler knew the wire service reporters traditionally had the privilege of ending the briefing.[22]

Ziegler also used tactics to (1) divide reporters among themselves — even reporters who worked for the same news organization; (2) solicit reporters' advice, or have senior White House aides go to reporters to ask for advice, thus trying to get them to "come on board"; (3) freeze reporters out of assignments to pools and not include them on overseas trips (this was done to **Newsday** following that newspaper's investigative series on Nixon's friend Bebe Rebozo); and (4) have the Internal Revenue Service audit the tax returns of reporters and newspapers who were not favorable toward the White House.[23]

The **Columbia Journalism Review** compiled a list of eight other tactics that were used.[24] They included:

—the broad and meaningless statement, simply dealing in generalities;

—the I'll-try-to-find-out ploy, whereby Ziegler or Warren would say they would find the answer to a reporter's question, then delay several hours and hope the reporter would forget;

—the I-stand-on-my-previous-answer answer, simply referring to earlier statements that reporters did not have right at hand;

—the I-wouldn't-join-you-in-the-gutter response, based on insinuation;

—the wild goose chase, sending reporters to other agencies to try and find information;

—no comment;

—the carefully constructed deception, making reporters believe they had heard an answer when later analysis revealed no answer actually had been given;

—the lie.

This article noted that these tactics were not all invented by the Nixon White House, but they were adopted to deal with the press.

Ronald Nessen

When Ronald Harold Nessen came to the White House, he

was quite conscious of Ron Ziegler and the dubious legacy Ziegler had left. He realized his first problem: the suspicion and cynicism left over from the Nixon administration. He knew Gerald Ford had a lot of Richard Nixon to make people forget and he, Nessen, had a lot of Ziegler to make people forget. On the day when Gerald Ford came (New York **Times**, 10-27-74) into the press room with Nessen to introduce him to the White House press, one of Nessen's first remarks was "I'm a Ron but not a Ziegler."

"I will never knowingly lie to you, never knowingly mislead the White House press corps," Nessen said (New York **Times**, 9-21-74). "If I do, you'd be justified in questioning my usefulness in this job."

That was, in John Osborne's view, the "ritual" pledge. Reporters and columnists who cover the White House, Osborne wrote, were pleased with Ford's open policy and Nessen's statements. But they

> forgot that the controlling function of White House press secretaries and other official spokesmen is not to tell the truth. It is to put the best possible appearance on what their principals do and say and, if necessary in the course of that endeavor, to conceal the truth.[25]

Those reporters and columnists were really celebrating Nixon's departure but suffered from the "quaint illusion that concealment and deception departed with him."

Good, Then Bad

Ron Nessen worked hard at being Gerald Ford's press secretary. He quickly found the job much different, more complex and tougher than he had imagined it would be. He spent five hours each morning in preparation for the daily briefing. He tried to make the briefings less acrimonious with an injection of humor and banter. But he found (New York **Times**, 10-27-74) that he had to change his job description slightly after being the press secretary for about a month. Instead of his primary function being service to the public, he found he had to serve the public, the press and the president.

One thing that distressed him was being described (New York **Times**, 10-27-74) as "arrogant" in news articles. It was disturbing, he said, because "the personality of a press secretary has a lot to do with how the press perceives not only him but the President and the whole Administration." He worked to implement the "open" policy Ford advocated. The Nixon administration wanted to keep reporters as far away from Nixon as possible. But Ford did not mind the contact with reporters. Ziegler made every White House official who talked to the press report that contact to the press office, and Ziegler sometimes vetoed interviews with White House staff members. Nessen said he did not plan to do that.

Other improvements Nessen made were allowing follow-up questions at presidential news conferences and adding a television film crew to the pool reporters on Air Force One. He would come from key administration meetings with volumes of on-the-record quotes from participants. And when Ford visited Nixon in a hospital, Ziegler would not allow the press pool anywhere near the Nixon hospital suite. But Nessen observed the bedside meeting and gave reporters a graphic description of the scene, including quotes from both Nixon and Ford.[26]

Throughout all the trouble that would follow in Nessen's tenure, he had one thing that saved him: solid approval of his performance from Ford. "I think he's doing a hell of a job," Ford said in early 1975.[27] As press relations declined, that would later serve Nessen in good stead.

When Ford traveled overseas, there were complaints that members of the press secretary's office were not available when they were needed, questions went unanswered and advance texts of Ford's remarks were not delivered before speeches were given.[28]

The Far East trip to Vladivostok was the low point in staff operation, up to that time. Lower points would come later. Some reporters were not informed of briefings, along with the complaints mentioned above. It was left to James Deakin of the **Post-Dispatch** — who has covered presidents since Eisenhower — to sum up the situation: "For the most part, Nessen's operation gives a rich, new dimension to the meaning of mediocrity."[29]

Then the problem of credibility again occurred. Nessen had said he would not "knowingly" mislead. "Suspicion was rampant after the pardon of Nixon and the related resignation of terHorst as press secretary," the Washington **Star** said (4-15-75) in an unsigned news article. One of the first questions directed to Nessen as press secretary concerned the post-pardon telephone conversation between Ford and Nixon. There was a question of Nixon returning the pardon because it had caused so much trouble for Ford. Nessen said in a briefing that Nixon had made no such remark about the pardon. But it later came out that Nixon had, and Nessen was in trouble.

Several problems were listed by the **Star**. Nessen said Ford would not impose the second and third dollars of a controversial oil tariff; but Ford did. Several White House meetings with officials occurred, and there were questions as to whether Ford or the officials had requested them. A question was raised concerning Nessen's actual understanding of the complex economic matters about which he was providing information to the press.

Then came partisanship. Although admittedly the "point man" for the administration and the most visible White House aide, Nessen kept prodding Congress to enact Ford's proposed tax cut, castigating legislators for their slow activity and wondering aloud if Congress should delay its recess. Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield finally tired of the messages and publicly criticized Nessen. Then, during Ford's Far East meeting with Soviet Communist leader Brezhnev, Nessen made several inflated claims about Ford's accomplishments, the far-reaching nature of which he later had to apologize for, the **Star** said.

But things were improving. Nessen stopped his jokes at briefings after several articles that were critical of them appeared. He began to whip his staff into better operation. As the **Star** wrote:

> If reporters remain a bit wary of Nessen's pronouncements, it is nothing like their full-blown distrust of Ziegler. And whatever troubles Nessen has encountered with reporters have not diminished his standing with Ford and the inner circle of White House aides.

The Big Blowup

Problems began on June 6, 1975. Nelson Rockefeller had promised release of his commission's report on CIA activities, but Ford wanted to read the report before its release. Nessen had (Washington **Star**, 6-27-75) to face the press and explain why release of the report was being delayed — in effect, he had to take the heat for Rockefeller. Quickly,

charges of "cover-up" flew from some White House reporters. One called Nessen a "liar," maintaining Nessen had promised release of the report that day.

Several days later, other cases followed: questions on U.S. nuclear weapons policy and a meeting between Ford and John Connally that was not announced (Los Angeles **Times**, 6-28-75).

On June 26, 1975, Nessen interrupted his regular briefing to read a prepared statement attacking the press. "This President," Nessen said, "has been in office for ten months now. I think that is more than enough time for this blind, mindless, irrational suspicion and cynicism and distrust to evaporate."[30]

Some people at the briefings, Nessen continued (Washington **Post**, 6-27-75), were "too quick to charge or imply that there were cover-ups" when there was no evidence to support such charges. He continued:

> I said I thought that that was poisoning the atmosphere of these briefings. I want to add today that I think that some people here are too quick to make unsubstantiated charges or implications that I am lying or that my credibility has been destroyed.

Nessen said he had kept his promise not to knowingly mislead the press. Ford, Nessen said, was a man of integrity and honesty, and newspaper readers and television viewers

> are badly served and, in fact, are misled when suspicions are raised about everything said here when there is nothing to base those suspicions on except blind and irrational mistrust and the cynical thinking habits that have built up over the past 10 years.

Nessen said none of his superiors, including Ford, knew about the statement. As Fred Barnes wrote in the Washington **Star** (6-27-75):

> In any event, the timing of the attack was somewhat strange. Nessen, after some rough going in his early months as press secretary, has developed a measure of rapport with most reporters who cover the White House regularly. And Ford's excellent relationship with newsmen is well-known. . . .

Nessen later said he hoped that the attack would open a festering wound and that it would turn into a dialogue with reporters to improve relations.[31]

Nessen had forgotten (Washington **Post**, 6-27-75) about the Ford-Connally meeting, an oversight that troubled reporters. Questions were asked about Nessen's use of inaccurate or insufficient information. While reporters did not feel he was lying, the information he gave led to incorrect or misleading stories. Tom Brokaw of NBC said he felt that Nessen regarded proper questions as a challenge to his authority and that, coupled with the baiting questions from a few reporters, caused the suspicious atmosphere at briefings.

Report Cards

If previous reviews of Ron Nessen's actions on Ford's earlier trip to the Far East were bad, the reviews that followed Ford's trip to China were terrible. Again, Nessen came in for heated criticism.

Shortly after the trip, the National Press Club issued a report based on an eight-month study of White House-press corps relations. Venom was reserved especially for Nessen on the China trip. As **Newsweek** said:

> While the study gave Nessen some points for efficiency and openness — especially in comparison with the stonewalling Nixon press office — it cited reporters' complaints of his "arrogance" and "irascibility." And on the recent Presidential visit to China, it said, Nessen "plunged to his nadir" with perhaps "the most inept performance in modern times" by a press secretary overseas. The report concluded: "It is difficult to see how Nessen can be the Presidential spokesman abroad unless he finds some way to improve on this kind of disastrous nonperformance."[32]

His performance in China, the report said, was "distinguished chiefly by long absences from the press room and by the presentation of inadequate information when he appeared."[33]

The report did give Nessen credit for improving contacts between the press and the president,[34] including (New York **Times**, 1-18-76) follow-up questions at press conferences with Ford, individual interviews with the president and informal conversations between Ford and reporters.

In a column after the Peking trip, Martin Schram of **Newsday** wrote (Milwaukee **Journal**, 12-14-75) that the trip was a professional disaster, ending with the White House press "embittered, virtually unanimously," over what they termed Nessen's "inept performance." Never before in memory had a press secretary done so poorly abroad and never before had that opinion been unanimous and discussed so openly by the White House press, Schram said. Nessen was hardly available for consultation and unreachable by phone.

Yet Nessen accepted (New York **Times**, 1-18-76) the blame the report gave him. And he gained some confidence that he was performing the job — in a strange way — that recent press secretaries had had to do: take the heat personally and deflect the heat from the president.

Jody Powell

> He comes to his White House job with extraordinary credentials. Not as a newsman; he has never worked as a reporter. He has great potential simply because there has never been a press secretary with a relationship with a president such as Powell enjoys with Carter.[35]

That was the Boston **Globe's** Curtis Wilkie describing Jody Powell, the present secretary in the West Wing press office. And, as is usual when a new press secretary takes over, the comparisons begin to be made.

> Will he remain as personally close to Carter as Bill Moyers once was to Lyndon Johnson? Will he be as powerful and occasionally vicious as Jim Hagerty was under Dwight D. Eisenhower? As unbending, devious, and loyal as Ziegler, thus losing his credibility? Will he continue to play the buffoon the way Salinger did?[36]

So far in Jimmy Carter's term — and Jody Powell's tenure

as press secretary — Powell has used, to some extent, all four of those tactics. In an evaluation of his short tenure in office, some of the actions of Jody Powell will be noted, as well as some of the early criticisms that have been offered. However, it is probably too early to place any kind of stamp upon Powell at this point.

He has been described as "gregarious, combative, mercurial, informative, and intensely loyal to Carter," a man who enjoyed sitting around with reporters late at night during the campaign, telling jokes and drinking. Although he can be stubborn, he can speak with the assurance that he knows Carter's positions. His quick wit and personality are popular.[37]

The Washington **Post's** political correspondent David Broder has also noted (Los Angeles **Times**, 11-21-76) another important trait about Powell:

> Every reporter who covered the Carter campaign has seen Powell correct Carter publicly and disagree with his boss when he felt it was necessary. Powell has often been a critic of the press coverage of Carter, and he has never been shy about expressing his criticism — directly and forcefully — to the reporters involved. But, so far at least, he has managed to remember that the press has a different responsibility than he does. . . .

Praise and Problems

Plains, Ga., one December day in 1976, was scarce on news and newsmen were frustrated. That day, at Jody Powell's daily briefing, a network correspondent kept asking for a definitive statement on a subject, but Powell was not in the mood to give one. Tempers were about to flare. "Aw hell, Bob," Powell said calmly. "We're both good fellows. We were both brought up right. I don't know where we went wrong." Everyone began laughing, and Powell leaned back and lit a cigarette. The tension evaporated.[38]

That down-home-Georgia-boy humor has been one of Powell's chief assets. Another is his closeness to Carter, as reporters feel he can interpret Carter's mind and mood. And, reporters know they are free to talk to White House staffers, a freedom rarely granted in past administrations.[39]

Another technique that has pleased print journalists is Powell's assistance in setting up informal conferences with Carter. The talks first began in the campaign and were quiet, informal sessions without glaring television lights or commotion over who would ask the next question. Powell and Carter have also worked to open up accessibility to television correspondents.[40]

Powell has won praise for his candor. And he has made himself available for private meetings with reporters concerning ideas for stories, plus answering questions after briefings.[41]

But all is not praise for Powell. As **Time** magazine wrote:

> He is perpetually disorganized and chronically late. He promises to look up facts and somehow rarely does. He constantly writes himself notes and then loses them. He tries to return all phone calls — but then forgets.[42]

Powell's humor has turned to sarcasm at times. Although there have been few heated confrontations between Powell and reporters, Carter's penchant for slipping out of the White House early in 1977 — without telling reporters, and after Powell had said there would be no more news on those days (putting the "lid" on) — has caused some sharp questions. Powell acknowledged that Carter chose to go places without telling reporters, and if the press wanted to charge a loss of credibility or a lack of trust, that was fine with him.[43]

One flare-up of Powell's sarcasm came when he announced that Carter was writing hundreds of thousands of letters to Americans to solicit their ideas on energy. Reporters jokingly asked if the best replies might gain invitations to state dinners. Powell bristled:

> . . . the people in this room seem to be the least concerned about public involvement in the governmental process, which strikes me as being a rather awkward position to find yourselves in. . . . I think there is a degree of cynicism present . . . which I have found somewhat surprising.[44]

Powell later apologized for his remarks.

Overreactions

Powell has exhibited a tendency to overreact to criticism of Carter and the Carter administration. Some protests have caused stories to grow bigger than they were.

One storm of protest broke on April 25, 1977. That day the New York **Times** published a "mood" story by Jim Wooten that suggested that Carter "tended to stifle and intimidate his subordinates"; that Carter could be courtly with those he wished to please but "brutally brusque" with those who displease or disagree with him; that Carter clings to power and is "ill at ease with strong-minded assistants who dissent"; that there was a problem of staff morale because of a lack of attention or praise from Carter; that Cabinet members were hesitant to speak at meetings for fear of disagreeing with Carter; that Carter tended to isolate himself alone in his study; and, the charge that appeared to infuriate Powell most, that Carter had a "mounting jealousy about his power and responsibilities" and was snappish when chief aide Hamilton Jordan disagreed with him on one occasion.

Powell was (New York **Times**, 4-26-77) quick to respond. At the press briefing, he called the article "totally inaccurate" and "unfair" and said the brutal recluse charge was a "fairly serious charge." Powell revealed he had called 23 White House aides to see if they had talked to Wooten, but none admitted doing so.

At that briefing, Powell discussed the story for a half hour, seemingly more a denunciation than a denial. Reporters told Powell that the calling of Wooten and the aides — which he admitted at the briefing — was reminiscent of the Nixon press tactics. Bob Schieffer of CBS commented after Powell's remarks: "That's the first time I ever heard anyone deny a mood story. No reporter ever got his ass chewed out for missing a mood story. It would have just died. Now it'll go on and on."[45]

Wooten later said: "Powell is not a man to back away from a story or a reporter who he feels is challenging what he holds sacred, which of course is Carter. But this incident was out of character for him."[46]

With the summer of 1977 came the revelations that forced Bert Lance to resign from the Carter administration. Powell began (UPI dispatch, Shreveport **Times**, 9-2-77) in early September by criticizing the treatment of Lance in the press, with such words as "deplorable," saying that while Lance was being hit with "rocks and sticks," the White House was

having to reply with "pillowcases."

But in mid-September, Powell, angered at Senator Charles Percy's attacks on Lance, called the Washington bureau of the Chicago **Sun-Times** and tried to pass on unsubstantiated allegations against Percy. The attempt backfired. Powell said (Chicago **Sun-Times**, 9-15-77) in his next briefing — after the **Sun-Times** had printed a story revealing the bungled attempt — that he thought the information was passed in confidentiality. But the **Sun-Times** bureau chief, Loye Miller, said Powell failed to establish any ground rules prior to the conversation. Powell was forced to apologize to Percy, and said: "Given the tendency to review the past. . . in historical perspective, I think that was one of the things that made it inappropriate."

Powell admitted (**Wall Street Journal**, 9-15-77) his action was "inappropriate, regrettable and dumb," an assessment with which he said Carter agreed. Democrats and Republicans almost unanimously called it reminiscent of the Nixon era.

Closing Notes

In this study of presidential press secretaries, one thing has become apparent: These have been troubled times for any press secretary to be called upon to function in. Meg Greenfield, who covered the White House for **The Reporter** during the Johnson days and now writes for **Newsweek**, wrote at the time of Nessen's 1975 blowup about the "ten-year era of mounting incivility and the bad feeling between the White House and its attendant press, which was fueled by Vietnam and Watergate." That has led, she said, to

> the press corps's periodic excesses, which are admittedly pretty awful to behold. The White House press, having missed some of the major stories of the decade that were taking place under its collective nose, is understandably more prosecutorial in tone these days. But sooner or later it will stop seeing "liars" and "cover-ups" everywhere. . . . The central problem, however, will remain: an institutionalized relationship between White House press and White House press spokesman that is based on mutual necessity, mutual dependence and mutual dissatisfaction.[47]

The **Christian Science Monitor**'s Godfrey Sperling added (1-19-76) his thoughts on the problem. The White House press had Watergate uncovered virtually under its nose by two police reporters; from a sense of guilt, they would never forgive Ziegler or Nessen. As punishment, the White House press resorted to nagging and baiting, loving the ego trip of seeing the press secretary react defensively, or enjoying the expiation from their toughened stance.

Nessen, after he left the White House, said (St. Louis **Globe-Democrat**, 8-15-77) he felt the problem was that in this period, presidents have wanted to bring the entire news focus to the White House. Announcing good news from the White House, not from an executive department, was the trend, Nessen said. Thus, reporters have come to expect the White House to provide all the information. And that leads to the press secretary's frustration of working five hours daily to gather information for the press briefing, yet having reporters ask for only 40 percent of the information he has gathered, Nessen said.

Yet the system perpetuates itself. The briefings are (**Wall Street Journal**, 6-13-75) constant waiting and have been called a waste of time, "a kind of show," but they still remain the main method of dissemination of information from the White House.

The system may be the problem. One man, the press secretary, is called upon to know every policy development and facet of information of an entire presidential administration — policies that may have taken years to plan and execute. It is a mind-boggling concept, one that some former White House personnel have said should be eliminated.[48]

In fairness, many reporters did not approve of (Louisville **Courier-Journal**, 12-12-76) the baiting and heckling of the press secretary during the Nessen and Ziegler years. Some reporters left the briefing room shaking their heads in disgust.

Under Powell, briefings have calmed down (**Christian Science Monitor**, 3-14-77) from the shouting matches of past days. Some say it is just a honeymoon; others feel that Powell has brought order and harmony to the briefings despite some of his shortcomings. A more important reason is that many of the reporters who were so vengeful toward Nessen have left the White House beat, to be replaced with new reporters who have not been influenced by the hatred of the Nixon years and the hostility toward the presidency.

Although Jody Powell's actions will have a great deal of influence on that, it will be an interesting thing to watch. For it seems that Powell and Carter may have the chance to make the break from the troubled past that Nessen and Ford were not fully able to do.

FOOTNOTES

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